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TAGS: KWMN PREL KPAO PHUM NS

SUBJECT: SURINAME NOMINATION 09 SECRETARY'S AWARD FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE

REF: STATE 99729

¶1. (U) Post is pleased to nominate Juanita Altenberg-Dest, Director of the Maxi Linder Foundation, for the Secretary of State's 2009 Award for International Women of Courage.

¶2. (U) Biographical Information and justification for award selection:

Full legal name of nominee: Juanita Augusta Rudolphina Altenberg-Dest (note that Surinamese passport reads Altenberg spouse of Dest, as Surinamese women retain their maiden names for most purposes)  
Job title/association: Director of the Maxi Linder Foundation  
Date of birth: July 31, 1953  
Country of birth: Suriname  
Citizenship: Surinamese  
Address: Krakalaan 3, Paramaribo  
Telephone: (597) 863-6889  
Email: juanitada@sr.net  
Passport number: R 1033900

Justification:

Summary: Juanita Altenberg is co-founder and Director of the Maxi Linder Foundation, the sole organization in Suriname that educates and provides assistance to commercial sex workers. While the Foundation originally started their work by educating sex workers on condom use and increasing sex workers' awareness of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the Foundation's mission has expanded to include providing vocational training as well as encouraging and assisting commercial sex workers to leave the streets and find safer jobs to support their families. As such, Altenberg is advancing the President's Freedom Agenda by fighting against the spread of disease and protecting the human rights of underserved commercial sex workers.

Altenberg's belief that health care should not just be accessible for a small, privileged group, but to all, prompted her to choose a career in health care. She began her career at the Ministry of Health but was soon "loaned" to the National Aids Program (NAP) to coordinate their "commercial sex workers program". In this capacity, she and her team went out on the streets to educate sex workers on condom use and to increase sex workers' awareness regarding the HIV/AIDS virus. Interviews with the sex workers showed there was little knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS. Based on this information, Altenberg got together with a few other women to establish the Maxi Linder Foundation in 1994.

The Maxi Linder Foundation is the sole organization working with sex workers in Suriname and serves not only to educate sex workers (male and female) on health issues, but also provides a "safe haven." The Foundation conducts vocational training sessions, and it assists and motivates sex workers to leave the streets and find a safer job to support their families. Surveys conducted by the Maxi Linder Foundation showed that there are children on the streets as well.

Some are brought to "work" by their mother, while others do so due to poverty at home. Altenberg works tirelessly and sometimes with fear for her own life to get these children off the streets and into child care centers. She also works to increase awareness of the dangers amongst their parents/caretakers.

Altenberg frequently goes out into the streets and into the clubs to meet "new" sex workers. On many occasions, her team has discovered during these visits women who were trafficked into Suriname. Despite threats from brothel owners and others, and with fear for her own life, Altenberg succeeded in helping some of these victims leave the brothels and return to their countries of origin.

In the fourteen years since the establishment of the Foundation, Altenberg succeeded in raising awareness among commercial sex workers of HIV/AIDS and condom use. She also succeeded in bringing topics such as sexually transmitted diseases, commercial sex work, and empowerment of commercial sex workers out of the sphere of the taboo and into the open for discussion. She succeeded in empowering women who formerly worked on the streets so that they could choose safer jobs in providing for their families.

¶3. (U) Post has informed Altenberg of her nomination. She is honored and accepts with gratitude. Post's POC for women's issues is Political/Economic Chief Geneve Menscher; email menscherge@state.gov.

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